

Nature Festivals Going Virtual

By Celeste Silling

This past year, in-person festivals were almost nonexistent. But in their place, we discovered a new form of community event: the virtual festival. Virtual festivals had their downsides of course; you couldn't walk around, smell the buttery popcorn, or eat a fried oreo. But they also had some impressive up-sides. Folks could attend these events from all over the world, visiting places they could never have seen in person and meeting new and different people. You could attend a beach birding festival in California and a tulip festival in Holland on the same day!

Festivals that were previously held in far away places were now in our living rooms. But the change in location wasn't the only new convenience. These virtual festivals also tended to be much cheaper! Visitors saved money on transportation, lodging, and food, plus the ticket prices were often far below the normal asking price. This made the festivals far more accessible to people who wouldn't normally be able to afford the experience or take time off from work to travel.

For nature festivals, these benefits were particularly prevalent. Along with new places and faces, virtual attendees were seeing new species, new habitats, and new conservation efforts! We all care about our local ecosystems, but it's exciting to see exotic flora and fauna too. Visitors could make new friends in the comments section, and, as a bonus, they could often share the content on social media, bringing all of their friends and family to the festival with them!

For those of us who hosted these festivals, it was amazing to see the support and fascination from our guests over the internet. We were able to raise money for our research and conservation projects, even when the world was distanced from us. The attendees had fun, and we were able to spread our message of conservation far and wide! We hope that the folks who were introduced to us through the virtual events will even some day join us for live ones.

This is why, even though things are opening back up again, you will likely continue to see virtual or hybrid events. We at the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, for instance, will be hosting our Virtual Bird Bash on May 15 and 16 on Facebook. During this event, we will be hosting an array of speakers who will present about everything from owls to coral reefs to bird tracking technology. We will also have a live streamed bird-banding session where attendees will get to see our bird research subjects up close in our hands. The best part? It's all free!

To watch our Virtual Bird Bash and see how we make a Nature Festival virtual, tune in to Gulf Coast Bird Observatory's Facebook page on May 15 and 16 from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. and click on the live video. To see the full schedule of speakers and events, go to www.gcbo.org. We hope to see you there!

Photo by Celeste Silling. Caption: Virtual Bird Bash will feature a bird-banding session where attendees will get to see our bird research subjects up close in our hands.